

**MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE COMMUNITY POLICY DEVELOPMENT
GROUP HELD AT FOLLATON HOUSE, TOTNES ON
WEDNESDAY 27 MAY 2009**

MEMBERS

* Cllr R C Steer – Chairman

* Cllr B F Cane – Vice-Chairman

∅ Cllr N A Barnes

* Cllr S E Cooper

* Cllr C W Jones

* Cllr L P Jones

∅ Cllr I Longrigg

∅ Cllr D M O'Callaghan

* Denotes attendance

∅ Denotes apologies for absence

Also in attendance and participating:

Cllrs H D Bastone, M J Hicks, M F Saltern and R J Tucker

Officers in attendance:

All Agenda Items: Strategic Director (Community), Housing Advice Manager,
Affordable Housing Officer, Enabling and Development Officer and Member Support
Officer;

Item 5 (minute CPDG.03/09 below refers) Community Development Officer

CPDG.01/09 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting of the Community Policy Development Group held on 17 March 2009 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

CPDG.02/09 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Members and officers were invited to declare any interests in the items of business to be considered during the course of the meeting, but none were made.

CPDG.03/09 SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY STRATEGY ACTION PLAN UPDATE

The Strategic Director (Community) informed the Group that the purpose of the report was to update Members on the revised Action Plan for the South Hams Sustainable Community Strategy for the period 2009-2011. The aim of this strategy was to drive improvements in the quality of life for everyone in the district and to develop a joined-up approach to an effective delivery of public services.

During the discussion, the following points were made:-

- a) The importance of the role of the lead Agency listed for each action in terms of achieving the desired outcome was queried. In response, the Strategic Director (Community) informed that the lead agency would be the primary driver, particularly if the action linked to their own organisation's priorities e.g. South Hams District Council (SHDC) would lead on affordable housing. However, agencies also worked equitably together, such as on the 'Shop Local' campaign to support the local economy. Overall, it was felt that better outcomes were achieved when all agencies worked in partnership;
- b) A Member asked what organisations were represented on the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP). The Group was informed that the LSP was represented by statutory agencies such as the Police and health, the four town councils, business groups and voluntary agencies. Members noted that the Community Partnership Forum consisted of representation from a much wider range of groups and agencies which fed into the LSP;
- c) A non-group Member asked if the matter of funding of the LSP had been raised with partners, as the Council was frequently the lead agency, and whilst it was recognised that partnership work served a function, it did pose risks in terms of representing value for money. In reply, the Strategic Director (Community) informed that partner agencies had been consulted on this matter but their response generally was that their role was to engage with the process, particularly in the case of the voluntary agencies and that ultimately the Council was responsible for managing the partnership. The Member responded that this feedback would be of note when an assessment of Partnerships was made and went further stating that the possibility of 'sharing' an LSP with West Devon Borough Council could be a possibility when considering the shared service agenda. In response, the Officer advised that he felt some of the partners would be supportive of that suggestion and it could be raised for discussion.

It was then:-

RECOMMENDED

That the Executive be **RECOMMENDED** that the Group has noted the revised Sustainable Community Strategy Action Plan 2009-11 and found it to be satisfactory.

CPDG.04/09 **REVIEW OF CORPORATE HOUSING SERVICES**

The Group was informed that the structure of the Corporate Housing Service had been reviewed in 2006 which led to the separation of the service into three separate functions. These were: Housing Advice and Homelessness (aligned with the Customer Service Team in Revenue and Benefits), Affordable Housing (aligned with Community Regeneration), and Private Sector Housing (aligned with the Environmental Health Service). Strong links were maintained between the separate functions with structured monthly meetings and higher level meetings of the South Hams Strategic Housing Forum attended by the Strategic Director (Community) and Officers from the Legal, Forward Planning and Development Control Services.

A report was then considered that informed Members of areas identified for improvement following a review of the Corporate Housing Service. In terms of a key area of improvement it was stated that the existing Housing Strategy had been formulated in a different economic climate when the economy was booming and when it was anticipated that the income streams from second homes council tax would be available to fund an ambitious programme. It had, therefore, been recognised that the strategy needed to be urgently revisited.

The Group was also informed that the formal strategy review process would commence within the next month and be undertaken in consultation with Members and Key Stakeholders, Community Groups and Government Office. Following consultation on the emerging priorities, it was anticipated that approval for the strategy would be sought during autumn 2009, with adoption to follow in late 2009.

It was then:

RECOMMENDED

That the Executive be **RECOMMENDED** that:-

1. the Group has assessed the outcome of the recent Corporate Housing Services Review and found it to be satisfactory;
2. the Group approve of the proposed timetable for the adoption of the Housing Strategy in late 2009

CPDG.05/09 **HOUSING ADVICE SERVICES UPDATE**

Members considered a report that updated them on progress made within the Housing Advice Section in the last twelve months, following the submission of a report to the Group in May 2008 entitled 'Future Direction of Housing Advice Services Update Report' (minute CPDG.7/08 refers).

Of particular note, was the progress that had been made in the reduction of the use of temporary bed and breakfast accommodation. A challenging target for local authorities had been set by the Government to reduce by 2010 the number of households in temporary accommodation to 50% of the levels in 2004. The Government had also stated that by 2010, 16 & 17yr olds were no longer to be housed in bed and breakfast and indeed since April 2008 the Council had not had to do this. Instead, young people had been placed in supported lodging with host families. The service had seen a continuing drop in the use of Bed and Breakfast and was on track to meet the target of 49 households in such accommodation by March 2010. In financial terms this had resulted in a reduction from a high in March 2007 of £170,000 to just under £6,000 for 2008/09 though this saving was offset by a further cost of £28,000 for supported lodging.

The Strategic Director (Community) emphasised to the Group that there had also been a major shift in focus from merely reacting to homelessness to more preventative measures, such as assisting clients to find alternative private rented accommodation or providing financial assistance, such as rent deposits.

A Member asked if the criteria for the Government Mortgage Rescue Scheme was as restrictive as had been widely publicised. In response, the Enabling and Development Officer informed that the criteria was restrictive and that to date only one family had been assisted by the scheme nationally. Banks were extending the deferral of interest payments but the reality was that there would be a greater demand on the Housing Advice and Homelessness section.

The Chairman acknowledged the significant work that had been undertaken by the team and wished for this to be noted.

It was then:

RECOMMENDED

That the Executive be **RECOMMENDED** that the Group note the report and was satisfied with the progress that was being made.

CPDG.06/09 CHOICE BASED LETTINGS

The Group was informed that the Government had set a target that by 2010 all local authorities would have adopted a Choice Based Lettings (CBL) scheme. A presented report updated Members on the current position in respect of the introduction of the Devon CBL. To date, all ten authorities and twenty Registered Social Landlords were committed to joining the scheme. The scheme was a shift from the previous 'points and waiting list' system to a banding system which would enable prospective tenants the flexibility to move for work or family support commitments.

Initially, there had been concerns that there would be an increased demand in applications for residency in the South Hams, but the most significant increase in demand was likely to be in urban centres providing job opportunities. In the scheme, prospective tenants would be assigned to either Band A, B, C, D or E. Banded A tenants being given top priority for housing.

During the discussion, the following points were made:

- a) A Member commented that the CBL scheme was already finalised and any debate was therefore pointless. In response, the Strategic Director (Community) stated that given the scale of change, it was unlikely that the policy would be fit for purpose in all respects at the outset and that the scheme could be viewed as a pilot to be monitored. It would also be critical to consult with tenants housed through this process so that feedback could be used to modify the scheme based on their experience. He further went on to say that Member comments, and particularly any concerns they had, would be a useful contribution as future reviews could assess the scheme against any concerns raised and hence any emerging issues could be brought to the attention of the steering group;
- b) The Officer was asked what type of minor amendments to the policy was envisaged. The Group was informed that these may be adjustments to the overarching policy agreed by all participating bodies, and not specific to the Council;
- c) Clarification was sought on what length of time tenants with a local connection had to bid during the 'preferential period' and whether this was open to prospective tenants in all bands. In reply, the Housing Advice Manager informed that properties would be advertised on a weekly basis and that some properties would be advertised with 'preference given to certain groups including those with a local connection'. The current local restrictions on Section 106 agreements and local lettings policies would still apply and adverts would state that preference would be given to applicants who met the criteria. The 2% ratios for tenants from outside the local authority area would be closely monitored.

The opportunity to bid, would, in most instances, not be restricted, although the likely successful bidder would be an Emergency Band A or Band B applicant. However, there would be occasions when e.g. due to a requirement for social balance with a scheme, prospective tenants in other bands might be successful in their bid. However, he went on to say that if someone in a higher band category from outside the area submitted a bid, their application would supersede any local lower band applications.

- d) Considerable concern was expressed that the scheme would not be publicised through newspapers which had the potential to disadvantage vulnerable groups, such as the elderly and those without access to the internet. As a result the scheme would be heavily dependent on the voluntary sector to assist those groups in having equitable access to the process. In reply, the Housing Advice Manager advised the Group that the Council could advertise if it was prepared to share the £100,000 cost with any other partner agencies who felt this was a requirement in order to avoid discriminating against those without technical access or knowledge. The Group strongly felt that the Officers should report back to the Group in six months time to evaluate the impact of the promotion of the scheme. This was then **PROPOSED** and **SECONDED** and when put to the vote declared **CARRIED**;
- e) Lastly, a Member commented that being offered one bedroom accommodation was a bleak long term future for some couples and single people. In response, the Strategic Director (Community) stated that the lack of new affordable housing and limited public finances to support future development would pose a serious challenge to increasing choice in the affordable housing sector and that we had to focus on making the best use of the existing housing stock (e.g. addressing under occupation), increasing access to private rented accommodation and bringing empty dwellings back into use for those in housing need.

It was then:

RECOMMENDED

That the Executive be **RECOMMENDED** that:-

1. The Devon Home Choice Allocations Policy be adopted and that it should replace the current allocations policy on the implementation of the Devon Home Choice Scheme within the South Hams;
2. Members delegate authority to the Strategic Director (Community) in consultation with the Executive Member for Housing to agree minor amendments to the Policy; and

RESOLVED

3. That subject to the agreement of the Programming Panel, a monitoring report be presented back to the Group in six months from the date of implementation of the policy that assesses the impact of the methods of promotion of the scheme.

CPDG.07/09 TENANTS INCENTIVE SCHEME

Members considered a report that informed them of the Tenants Incentive Scheme aimed at reducing under occupation of existing stock. The proposed scheme, which would be jointly funded with Tor Homes and other local Housing Associations, would provide a cash incentive for households currently under-occupying to downsize to smaller properties. The funding for the incentive scheme would be set at a rate of a £2,000 fixed payment plus £1,000 per bedroom released. Half of this sum would be met by Tor Homes. Officers sought approval for £35,000 of capital expenditure from the Housing Investment Programme to deliver the scheme.

During the discussion, the following points were raised.

- a) A Member felt it was an excellent initiative but queried whether the incentives suggested would be sufficient to generate enough demand. In reply, the Affordable Housing Officer informed the Group that research had been undertaken and the package on offer was more generous than other areas undertaking a similar initiative. In addition, the tenant would reap the benefit of smaller future rent and utility bills;
- b) It was asked if geographical matching was limited. The Officer replied that the main stock was in the main towns, which could present problems, but also that some tenants may need to move on medical grounds;
- c) A Member asked if removal costs were additionally funded. The Group was informed that removal costs were factored into the £2,000 fixed payment, but if, for example, a tenant was moving into a new property they may benefit from new carpets, new fixtures and fittings, in addition to lower rents and utility bills;
- d) A Member **PROPOSED** that a monitoring report be presented to the Community PDG twelve months from the implementation of the scheme. This was subsequently **SECONDED** and when put to the vote declared **CARRIED**.

It was then:

RECOMMENDED

That the Executive be **RECOMMENDED** that

1. The Tenants Incentive Scheme be approved together with an allocation of £35,000 from the Housing Investment Programme Budget;
2. Responsibility for the operation of the initiative be delegated to the Affordable Housing Manager, in consultation with the Head of Community Regeneration and Lead Executive Member for Housing; and

RESOLVED

3. That subject to confirmation of the Programming Panel, a monitoring report be presented to the Community PDG twelve months from the implementation of the scheme.

CPDG.08/09 PRIORITISATION OF APPLICANTS FOR SHARED OWNERSHIP

Members considered a report that informed them of the current position in respect of prioritisation of shared ownership vacancies in the South Hams. When a shared ownership property became available, a request was made for a list of eligible applicants from the Homebuy Agent (currently Home2Own). A selection was then made in accordance with the predetermined priority groups and eligibility criteria. As demand often exceeded supply, this ensured key workers, and those with a local connection, were prioritised for vacancies in the South Hams.

It was then:

RECOMMENDED

That the Executive be **RECOMMENDED** that the Shared Ownership Prioritisation Policy be adopted.

CPDG.09/09 MINUTES OF THE PUBLIC SPACES WORKING GROUP

The minutes of the Public Spaces Working were duly considered and agreed.

(Meeting started at 2.00 pm and concluded at 3.40 pm)

Chairman